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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000183

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NIGERIAN "TALIBAN" ATTACKS MOST LIKELY NOT TIED TO TALIBAN NOR AL-QAIDA

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY A/DCM CLAUDIA ANYASO FOR REASONS 1.5 (B & D).

1. (C) Summary: Political, religious and economic leaders in Yobe State told Econoff in late January that what government officials and media initially labeled a radical Islamist organization or "Taliban," instead called itself the Hijra Group and probably had no links to foreign terrorist groups or to the almost defunct 1980s Nigerian Islamist group Maitatsine. Taking their name from the "withdrawal" to Medina of the Islamic prophet Mohammed, the Hijra Group was mostly urban, comparatively well off Nigerians who had moved to a commune-like village to set up their own isolated society. The Hijra Group may have used Islam as a battle cry in attacking government institutions, but until late December they had no weapons nor likely espoused extremist Islamic doctrine. The late December 2003-early January 2004 attacks on government installations were likely provoked by a communal incident, although by the end of the bloody affair the Hijra Group had seized considerable amounts of arms from police stations. With poverty and political corruption omnipresent in Nigeria, however, the country is an excellent breeding ground for Hijra-like sects as well as radical Islamic groups. End Summary.

Who Were the Hijra?

2. (U) According to press, Borno and Yobe Government officials, religious leaders and academic scholars, the Hijra Group was made up of individuals from wealthy Islamic families in Borno State, unemployed university students and friends and colleagues from other states including Ogun and Lagos. Several sources told Econoff during a late January reporting trip to Yobe and Borno that the Hijra Group were individuals who "fled a corrupt society" to pray and fast, settling in an isolated fishing area on the outskirts of a small village in the wetlands of northern Yobe State near the Niger border in early 2003. An official in Yobe stated the group was unconventional but left largely on its own due to connections many of its members had with the Borno and Yobe notables. Nonetheless, the group certainly did attack and kill policemen over a four-day period.

3. (U) According to local sources, the Hijrah group had neither been armed nor espoused extremist Islamist teachings. Government and local sources told Econoff that the group had lived peacefully and often met with local villagers to trade. Those sources believe the start of the problem was likely a request from a local chief to pay him a sum of money, as was the custom for fishing in the area. Perhaps they did not pay. Local leaders asked the Hijra members to leave the area where they had been living in tents and mud structures, and the police allegedly arrested several Hijra members on December 20. Group members, either provoked by the police or for other unknown reasons, then attacked the police on December 31.

4. (U) Local officials confirmed to Econoff that Hijra members overpowered police in Kannama (near Niger in northern Yobe) and took at least five police AK-47 rifles. Locals said the Hijra had not called itself "Taliban," nor had been referred to under that name until the Governor of Yobe called them that in the wake of published pictures showing an "Afghanistan" bumper sticker on a vehicle Hijra members had used in an attack. Other press reports called the group the Ahlul Sunna Waljama Islamic movement. Under whatever name, from January 1 to 3 the group then attacked other police stations in Yobe State before being stopped by police in the state capital, Damaturu.

Yobe State Governor

5. (U) Yobe State Governor Alhaji Bukar Abba Ibrahim told Econoff on 26 January that the so-called sect comprised misguided youth who settled in northern Yobe State to practice Hijra. Governor Ibrahim, a Muslim, said the group was emulating the Prophet Mohammed in a corrupted society to find a place where they could worship God as they pleased. Two sources in Borno said that Governor Ibrahim's son was among the 50 to 60 Hijra members. Ibrahim denied it, claiming that the police captured or captured 47 out of 54 Hadjira and none were originally from Yobe State. Governor Ibrahim bristled at Econoff's questions, saying the Hijra

Group left a black mark on all the government was trying to do in Yobe, and claiming that the international press had blown this story out of proportion.

Not Maitatsine Followers

16. (U) Post has seen other media and GON reports that the Yobe Hijra Group members belonged to the mostly defunct Maitatsine organization of the 1980s. When questioned, press and GON sources confirmed there was no/no connection to Maitatsine. (Note: Alhaji Muhammadu Marwa established a quasi-Muslim fringe group called Maitatsine that appealed to Kano State's poor and uneducated in the late 1970s by teaching that the modernity and the Nigerian leadership had corrupted true Islamic values. After the Emir of Kano banned Maitatsine from religious life in Kano because of Marwa opposition to the role of traditional rulers, the Maitatsine regrouped and sparked religious riots in Kano, Kaduna and Borno in the early and mid-1980s. Marwa died during a 1980 disturbance in Kano where over 4,000 people died. The Maitatsine are now disbanded, although they are blamed whenever Muslims use violence, and they are a potent reminder of a many young Muslims' rejection of Nigeria's ruling religious and political class. End note).

Potential For Religious Violence on the Increase

17. (C) On January 27, Econoff also met with several academics from the University of Maiduguri, Borno State, to discuss the Yobe Hijra group. Professor Abdulmumin Sa'ad, a nationally known sociologist, confirmed knowing students who had joined the Hijra group, and he claimed Yobe State Governor Ibrahim's son was a member. Sa'ad said the group was likely on an "idealistic outing in Yobe State," but he noted that this and other groups like it could easily turned violent and adopt extremist ideology or foreign ties. Other professors at the university stated that there has been an increase in sects starting on universities over the last few years -- Christian, Muslim, regional and ethnic. Sa'ad said that across the nation sects are on the rise in universities, while radical Islamist groups are also emerging from unemployed academics looking to make sense of their corrupt society. With Nigeria sinking into economic despair, he opined, radical groups will likely emerge and youth may look to Islamic extremism to strike back at economic and political injustice.

Poverty, Breeding Ground for Terrorism

18. (C) COMMENT: Throughout northern Nigeria, fringe leaders continue to mobilize their followers to reject secular Nigerian politics and society. Small sects like the Hijra Group seem to be more usual now than larger political organizations like that of the Zaria-based Muslim leader Ibrahim Zakzaki, who is allegedly linked to the Iranian government and often travels to Iran. Zakzaki had been able to mobilize thousands of his followers to civil disobedience in the past, and the Hijra Group attacks scared both the state and federal governments. A small sect could easily turn to terrorism, or be used as a tool by international terrorist groups. Over 14 police and military checkpoints were in place on the road in and out of Damaturu. The GON has launched an official investigation into the group which will be reported septel.

Roberts